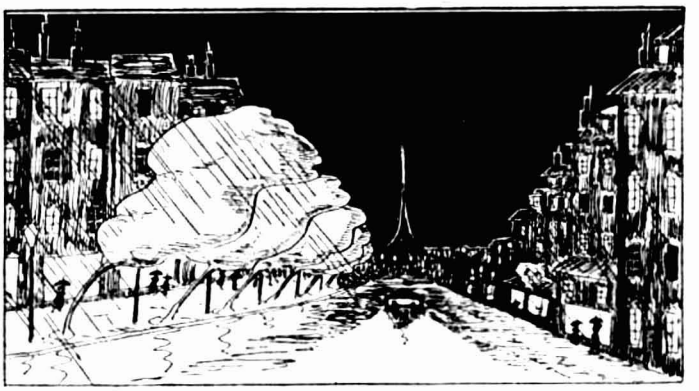
THE SUICIDE

By HENRI TROYAT



The author of this story is a man of two countries. Henri Troyat was born in Russia. But when he was six or seven, his parents fled from the Bolshevist Revolution and settled in France. There he grew up to become one of the foremost young authors of that country, winning the Prix Goncourt in 1938 for his novel "L'Araigne."

Although his childhood memories are vague, such Russian authors as Pushkin and Gogol awaken in him undefinable echoes. Yet he claims that it was the discipline of French authors that truly formed his writing. Perhaps it is these two influences which explain his mixture of romanticism and cruel realism, of enthusiasm and irony.—K.M.

FOR three months and eighteen days, Jean Dupont had been looking for an opportunity to break with his mistress without having to say to her: "I don't love you any more," or "I am sick," things which it is hard to make a woman in love believe. On December 7, at nine in the evening, he went to her apartment to prepare the ground for an attack on the following day. It is never out of place to feign a melancholy absent-mindedness, condescending boredom, or smiling pity toward a person whom one wishes to leave. There are certain preliminary phrases which have to be said whatever happens, and Jean Dupont was saying them over in his mind: "I am somewhat preoccupied. . . . Don't worry about me. . . . Nonsense, it will pass . . . . It is a kind of lassitude. . . . You wouldn't understand . . . . Yes, yes, I've been working too hard at the office . . . . Tell me what you've been doing, *chérie*."

However, the "*chérie*" who received him on this particular day did not have her usual appearance of a well-fed mare. Her eyes were damp, her nose was red around the nostrils, and her lipstick was smeared all over her mouth like a rash. She did not return the young man's little peck on her cheek. She did not ask him to sit down in the big armchair in which he had settled every Wednesday and Saturday for the last five years. She did not press her face against his male chest, murmuring: "You smell of the street." She did not whisper into his ear: "The bed is ready." No. Denise Paquet looked him straight in the eyes, with the expression of a woman who is hiding a bottle of vitriol in her bag. And, in a sepulchral voice, she uttered the following words:

"Jean, I don't love you any more. We must part."

"What?" yelled Dupont.

Surprise and joy overwhelmed him.

"Darling! Darling!" cried Denise. "I have hurt you, haven't I? But just the same, I had to. I love someone else. An Australian dentist. I have told him about you, too. He thinks very highly of you, without knowing you."

The scene which followed was wonderful. Jean Dupont, relieved, relaxed, happy, feigned manly despair: the mirthless smile; the muscle working at the corner of the jaw; the fingers clenched on the back of a chair, as on the parapet of a tower; the heaving chest, as if he were breathing with difficulty.

"I understand, I understand," he groaned.

And Denise, in tears, her hair in disorder, her clothes half falling off, told him her story in detail :

"At first I resisted. But it was stronger than I, stronger than us."

Jean Dupont asked: "Is he your lover?"

"Yes," said Denise.

Then, with an air of magnificent dignity, the young man took up his hat and his umbrella: "Good-by, Denise."

"We'll always be friends, won't we?"

"Between us two, there is no room for friendship."

"But we shall be forced to see each other every day at the office."

"I shall have myself transferred. The French Company for the Manufacture of Sterilized Coffeepots has at least a dozen departments. All I have to do is choose."

"Do you hate me?"

"No. I am already trying to forget you."

"Are you suffering much?"

Jean Dupont recalled a movie in which a bearded and taciturn actor had replied to a similar question with the simple word "horribly." And he said :

"Horribly."

Then he opened the door, crossed the threshold, and shut the door behind him, with the expression of a man drawing a sheet over the face of a corpse.

As soon as he was alone he cried "Oof!", clapped his hands, and ran down the dark, winding staircase which smelled of a grubby concierge and oily cooking.

In the street, a fresh wind whipped his face, and he stopped a moment to rest.

Free! Free! Free! Cars streamed by with a silken murmur. Passers-by all had gay, laughing faces. Shop fronts crackled with light. On the top floors of the houses, green, red, and blue advertisements went on and off in a frenzied throb. And even the rain fell with a slightly festive air around the street lights with their golden panes of glass. Jean Dupont felt as if the whole universe were sharing in his joy.

To go home by subway seemed absurd. What he needed was a taxi. A taxi and a movie. A movie and half a bottle of white wine after the show. Half a bottle of white wine and perhaps a passing adventure, "something to tickle the palate," as his colleague Cliche won say.

A row of taxis was standing in the middle of the Boulevard Montmartre. Traffic had come to a stop. Jean Dupont made for the waiting taxis. But he had not covered half the distance when the sound of a klaxon horn turned his stomach to ice. A car, coming up beyond the row of stationary vehicles, was making straight for him. He tried to step back, slipped, and fell. Two glaring headlights bored into the night. A shining advertisement spat blood onto the damp pavement.

"Ah!" screamed Jean Dupont. And suddenly he felt an enormous mass of something bowling him over, crushing his shoulder. There followed a great darkness, a great silence. When he opened his eyes again, he saw muddy shoes almost touching his face. And, higher up, there were unknown, frightened faces looking down at him. He was afraid. A searing pain shot through him. He lost consciousness.

JEAN Dupont was suffering from multiple fractures and bruises. "Two months rest in plaster," the doctor had said. And he had added: "We'll fix you up all right."

Two days after the accident, Jérôme Cliche, the young man's closest colleague,

came to see him. He sat down next to the patient and, with a grave, sympathetic expression, said: "Poor old chap!" And one could hear that he meant it sincerely.

Indeed, there was not much of Jean Dupont to be seen. His head was bandaged so that only a little square of flesh was visible where his eyes, nose, and lips poked out. A plaster tube imprisoned his left arm. His hands were two lumps of cotton wool bristling with safety pins. And his voice sounded as if it came from beyond the grave.

"Yes, I'm in a pretty bad way," he said.

His friend shrugged his shoulders: "And all that for a woman! What a business!"

"What do you mean, 'for a woman'?"

"Don't be so naïve!"

"What woman are you talking about?"

"Denise Paquet, of course!"

"I don't understand."

"Wasn't it because of her?"

Jean Dupont let out a cry as if a car had knocked right into him all over again: "You're crazy!"

"I don't see why. Denise Paquet has told me everything. Weren't you her lover?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you go and see her on the evening of the accident?"

"Yes."

"Didn't she admit to you what the whole office already knew, that she loved someone else?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

Cliche wore the triumphant smile of an acrobat taking his bow.

"Go on," said Dupont.

"The rest is simple. Having learned of your misfortune, you go out into the street and throw yourself under the wheels of a car."

Jean Dupont uttered a sort of rattling noise: "You poor idiot!" he groaned. "You forget that I myself had been wanting to break with her for nearly four months. Denise made the job easy for me by getting in first. She spared me a horrible task. She—"

"That's funny! You never told me you were getting tired of her."

"Because I am a decent fellow, well brought-up."

"One does not exclude the other."

"Listen, Cliche, I ask you to believe me: on the evening of December 7, when I left Denise, I was as happy as a man escaped from prison, as a drowned man coming back to life, as—"

"And that's why you went and threw yourself under a car?"

"But I didn't throw myself under a car!" shouted Dupont. "I slipped, I lost my balance, that's all!"

Cliche smiled with the exasperating air of one who knows better.

"Very ingenious," he said. "But what a pity that the witnesses are of a different opinion. 'It could only have been the act of a desperate man,' that's what they all say."

Jean Dupont was almost fainting with rage. "You cad!" he sobbed. "But Denise? Did you ask her at the office? Didn't she explain to you?"

"She explained that you were hypersensitive, and that she had been wrong not to be more considerate in telling you."

Jean Dupont's face streamed with sweat. He moved his big white snowman's paw to his chin and pushed aside the bandages. His breath came in gasps. He looked drunk, demented.

"Listen!" he said at last. "I am going to tell you something. Not only do I not love Denise, I hate her. She no longer excites me. You could present her to me naked on a platter and I would reply: 'Thanks, not for me. I pass.' She is clumsy, unappetizing, utterly colorless. She has ugly teeth. She walks

like a duck. She dresses badly. She has the fingers of a woman who strangles little children."

"Sour grapes!"

"Cliche," groaned Jean Dupont. "I shall loathe you if you go on like that."

"If you loathe me like you loathe Denise, I shall have nothing to complain of," replied the visitor with a maddeningly malicious look.

Jean Dupont, exhausted, beaten, rolled his head from one side to the other on the pillow.

"You know," went on Cliche, "your misplaced vanity surprises me. What is there to be ashamed of in loving a woman so much that one wishes to die on learning that she no longer loves one?"

The patient had closed his eyes, as if to gather all his energy for the final assault.

"Cliche!" he said at last in a dying voice. "I don't want to see you any more. Leave the room. Go away. And never come back. It will be better for you as well as for me."

But Cliche did not seem to have heard him. With the sweet, indulgent expression of a nurse, he arranged the bedclothes of the wounded man.

"There, there," he said, "you are moving around too much, you are getting uncovered, you will catch cold. What a funny little man you look!"

"I forbid you to call me a 'funny little man.' "

"Do you know that Malandrin, the chief, is coming to see you this evening?"

"I don't care!" screamed the unfortunate fellow suddenly. "I don't care! I don't care about anything!"

He raised himself on one elbow, but a violent pain shot through his shoulder. He fell back into the pillow. He even thought he was going to faint. Through the mist of dizziness he saw Cliche stand up, put on his overcoat and a hat with a drooping brim that looked like a mushroom. The clock next door struck one o'clock.

"I shall be late for lunch," said Cliche in a voice that seemed to come from very far away, through layers of fog and the noise of jangling bells.

"I want to be left alone, I want to be left alone—"

Footsteps faded away. A door slammed. And Jean Dupont knew that he was alone.

MONSIEUR Malandrin was a plump little man who smelled of beef tea. He had a puffy, fat, yellow face, a bulbous nose, and small eyes as black and shining as flies that feed on manure.

"Well, well, my young friend!" he said as he sat down next to the sick man. "You can be proud of having completely disorganized the peaceful life of our department!"

"You are too kind!" said Jean Dupont, for the sake of saying something.

"What an adventure! Do you know that I admire you?"

"Whatever for?"

"It is a fine thing to love so much that one despises death!"

"But I do not love, and I do not despise death."

"My young friend," said Monsieur Malandrin, "I am forty-seven, but I too was young once. And all I shall say to you is this: 'I sympathize with you. In your place, perhaps I should have done the same thing.' It is the quietest and most respectable men who nourish the wildest passions."

Jean Dupont was exhausted by his conversation of the morning. Nevertheless, he protested in a weak voice: "It was an accident, it wasn't suicide, Monsieur Malandrin."

The latter replied with a fatherly smile: "You're a nice fellow. And your discretion does you honor. Do you know that I have asked Monsieur Mourgue to hasten your promotion?"

"Thank you, Monsieur Malandrin," Dupont stammered, "but I assure you—"

"Let's shake hands, Monsieur Dupont. We are both men. We understand each other."

And Monsieur Malandrin pressed the huge bandaged paw of the patient between his plump midwife's fingers.

WHEN he was alone again, Jean Dupont reflected on this last visit. He had at first protested against the romantic interpretation which had been given to his accident. No doubt Denise Paquet was oozing with pride at the thought that he had tried to kill himself because of her. No doubt she was enjoying this role of vamp, of *femme fatale*. She was probably boasting, saying "the poor fellow" when she spoke of him, wearing false jewels in old-fashioned settings, enlarging her mouth with a blood-red lipstick, making up her eyelashes to look like black brooms. How disgusting! And he, who did not love her any more, who had wanted to break with her long before she had had any such intention on her own part, here he was relegated to the grotesque role of discarded lover! In the eyes of all he was the victim, the sucked lemon, the toy that no longer amused and that a wilful child had kicked under the radiator. That was what was so unbearable!

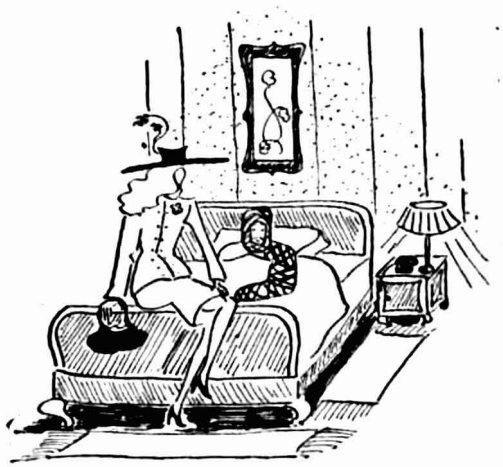
However, since Monsieur Malandrin's talk, Jean Dupont was no longer so sure of his rage. Indeed, it seemed as though sympathies were all on his side. All the nice people condemned Denise's conduct and admired his. The idea that one could die for a woman appealed to all women and many men as well. But the point was that he had not wanted to die for a woman. This reputation was just as false as that in which Denise was reveling. Oh! why wouldn't they believe him, admit the truth, and give him back his lost peace of mind!

Jean Dupont had a bad night. The next day at noon, one of the typists in his department dropped in to see him. She was a pretty girl, made up like a model in a shopwindow.

"That was a wonderful thing you did," she said to him, blushing. "You loved her very much, didn't you?"

Jean Dupont writhed in torture. He wanted to explain everything but, lacking the courage, turned away his head.

"Ah! if only all men were like you!" she went on, and it was clear that she



was thinking of someone in particular. "Did you suffer much?"

Jean Dupont looked at her. She was anxiously awaiting his reply. She was afraid of being disappointed. He felt sorry for her and said: "It was pretty bad."

"Did you decide suddenly to do it?"

"Yes—no—well—one does not think much at such moments."

He stopped. His own lie astonished and slightly disgusted him. He was ashamed of being admired for something he did not deserve. He felt as if he were deceiving someone, robbing someone.

"When one meets men like you, one feels reconciled with love."

Jean Dupont assumed a modest expression. "Let's not talk about it any more," he murmured. And the typist left, marveling.

During the days that followed, the patient was visited by several of his colleagues, and all assured him of their profound admiration for his chivalrous attitude and for the violence of his feelings. His mail contained anonymous letters which warmed his heart :

I should love to be loved like you love.
Signed: *Unknown blonde.*

There was also a little poem :

You who wished to die for her,
Would you not like to live for me?
Give me a sign and I'll be yours—
For I am not as cruel as she.
Signed: *A stenographer who admires grand passions.*

All these suggestions began to gnaw at Jean Dupont's innermost convictions. He tried to recall the frame of mind in which he had gone to see Denise for the last time. Had he really wanted to break with her that day? Had he really felt relieved at hearing that she no longer wanted him? Had he really said "Oof!" when he shut the door? He no longer felt quite sure. Of course, at the time of the accident he did not feel for Denise the exalted passion of former days; but his affection for the girl had remained the same. And he must have suffered secretly at seeing an Australian dentist preferred to himself. He had not wanted to admit it to her, he had not wanted to admit it to himself for reasons of vanity. But, at the bottom of his heart, there was a burning wound which had not yet healed. When that car had come straight at him, might he perhaps have had time to save himself? Some unconscious command had rooted him to the spot. He had not literally thrown himself under the wheels of the car; but not having avoided it meant that he no longer cared whether he lived or died.

"That's the truth, the real truth," he thought.

When Jérôme Cliche came to see him again and said: "How's the old spirit?" he replied :

"Not so good, old chap! Nothing has changed."

And he asked him for news of Denise: Was she worried about him? Did she seem sad, dejected, guilty? Was she thinking of coming to see him?

Jérôme Cliche, very embarrassed, was obliged to reply that Denise Paquet had not even inquired after him.

"She is just as proud as I am" said Jean Dupont. "She does not want to appear to be grieving for me."

When his friend had left, the young man had the charwoman bring him a certain shoebox in which he kept the letters and photographs of his mistress. He reread the long missives of which every sentence awakened a definite memory. He was touched at the mere idea that she used to call him "My Sunday sugarplum," "My icing-sugar angel," "My little stove of love," for Denise was inclined to become lyrical. He tried to recall the dress she had been wearing that Saturday when they had gone boating together on the Marne. He leaned her photos against his raised knees. He spent an hour looking at all those faces of Denise, all those smiles of Denise. Finally, he pinned the effigies of "her for whom he had wished to die" to the wall. Lying embedded in this sanctuary, he relived his past with painful acuteness. He was disheartened and sad. Work, eat, and sleep, and work again: that was what his future life would be like. He began to weep gently because it made him feel better.

But why didn't Denise come to see him? She was responsible for his accident, and she knew it. Was she afraid of yielding to pity? Was she afraid of taking up again with him? If she was afraid, it meant that she still felt herself to be weak. If she did not come, it meant that she still loved him. She loved him! She loved him! She loved him!

He asked the charwoman to write a letter at his dictation :

My Denise, I forgive you and I am waiting for you. Come. JEAN.

The week that followed was a terrible ordeal. Jean Dupont started up at the

slightest sound of the bell, and when one of his friends came into the room he received him with a sullen face and asked him to shorten his stay in order not to exhaust him. Soon his colleagues, feeling discouraged, gave up visiting him. He remained all alone throughout the interminable days, dreaming, talking out loud, weeping. He spoke to Denise's photographs, he answered his own questions the way he would have liked her to answer them; he chewed the corners of his pillow. The charwoman felt somewhat apprehensive and said "that creature had turned his brain." Nevertheless, she agreed to write again to Denise Paquet. But the second letter remained unanswered like the first.

AFTER two months, the doctor allowed Jean Dupont to go out for an hour's walk. When he went out for the first time it was to go to the girl's apartment. He had shaved carefully, put on clean clothes, and doused himself in perfume. He did not feel dissatisfied with himself.

On arriving at Denise Paquet's front door on the fifth floor, his heart was beating so violently that he had to lean against the wall. "I am going to see her, I am going to see her!" he said over and over again, "and everything will be like it was before!" At last he rang the bell. No one answered. He rang again. Once, twice, three times. After every sound of the bell, the silence of the empty apartment froze his heart. He started to bang on the door.

"What do you want?" shouted a voice from one of the floors below.

Jean Dupont leaned over the banister and saw the concierge coming upstairs.

"Miss Denise Paquet, if you please?"

"She moved out three weeks ago."

"Three weeks ago?"

"Yes, after she got married!"

Jean Dupont felt his knees turn to water, and his brain reeled.

However, he went down the stairs, one by one, and out into the street. He wandered around for nearly two hours, stunned, miserable, and yet quite calm. A strange life was beginning for him, a life which had nothing in common with his former life. He looked at the people hurrying by, at the brightly lit shop windows; and he was filled with a kind of astonishment that the world should continue to exist while he himself was already out of the world.

He arrived at the Boulevard Montmartre; it was raining. The electric signs lit up the wet surface of the road with bright colors. Jean Dupont was reminded of the day of his accident. So this was the place. Cars had halted in the middle of the road. He had taken one step, two steps—

He looked up toward the black sky, then down at the gutter where dead leaves were rotting. A car was approaching, almost scraping the sidewalk. Jean Dupont drew his head down between his shoulders, pressed his elbows against his sides and, when the car was only two yards away, let himself fall under its wheels.

There was a sudden roar, a horrible shock, a blazing crash. When they picked him up, he was no longer alive.